



January 13, 2000

Mr. George Cato  
Office of General Counsel  
Texas Department of Health  
1100 West 49<sup>th</sup> Street  
Austin, Texas 78756-3199

OR2000-0136

Dear Mr. Cato:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act, chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 131274.

The Texas Department of Health (the "department") received a written request for three categories of information regarding the McAllen Heart Hospital. You state that the department does not possess any records responsive to the second and third requested items. With regard to the first requested item, you state that the department has released one document, with certain information redacted. You contend that the redacted information is made confidential under section 241.051 of the Health and Safety Code, and thus must be withheld from the public pursuant to section 552.101 of the Government Code.

Section 552.101 of the Government Code protects "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, *statutory*, or by judicial decision." (Emphasis added.) Section 241.051 of the Health and Safety Code provides in pertinent part:

(d) All information and materials obtained or compiled by the department in connection with a complaint and investigation concerning a hospital are confidential and not subject to disclosure under Section 552.001 et seq., Government Code, and not subject to disclosure, discovery, subpoena, or other means of legal compulsion for their release to anyone other than the department or its employees or agents involved in the enforcement action except that this information may be disclosed to:

(1) persons involved with the department in the enforcement action against the hospital;

(2) the hospital that is the subject of the enforcement action, or the hospital's authorized representative;

(3) appropriate state or federal agencies that are authorized to inspect, survey, or investigate hospital services;

(4) law enforcement agencies; and

(5) persons engaged in bona fide research, if all individual-identifying and hospital-identifying information has been deleted.

(e) The following information is subject to disclosure in accordance with Section 552.001 et seq., Government Code:

(1) a notice of alleged violation against the hospital, which notice shall include the provisions of law which the hospital is alleged to have violated, and a general statement of the nature of the alleged violation;

(2) the pleadings in the administrative proceeding; and

(3) a final decision or order by the department.

The information you seek to withhold pursuant to section 241.051 pertains to a pending investigation. You indicate that the requestor is not entitled to obtain any of the information at issue pursuant to section 241.051(d). You further state that the department does not possess any information made subject to public disclosure under section 241.051(e). After reviewing the document at issue, we have marked the information that the department must withhold pursuant to section 241.051. The remaining information, however, must be released.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the

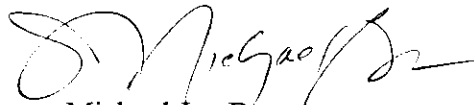
full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Jay Burns", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michael Jay Burns  
Assistant Attorney General  
Open Records Division

MJB/RWP/nc

Ref.: ID# 131274

cc: Ms. Louise M. Joy  
Joy & Young  
1801 South Mopac, Suite 300  
Austin, Texas 78746  
(w/o enclosures)